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AUTHOR Polite, Vernon C.; Adams, Arlin Henry
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ABSTRACT

This research digest reports on the efforts of Socratic Seminar methodology at Lookout Valley Middle School, a small middle school in Chattanooga (Tennessee). An integral part of the Paideia Schools Movement among public schools in Chattanooga, Socratic Seminars are well-planned opportunities for middle school students to engage in intelligent discussions to scrutinize ideals, values, social issues, and principles. Socratic Seminars are fashioned after the instruction-through-questioning methodology of Socrates. They focus on a wide range of topics and are designed to enhance critical thinking. The Seminars were studied through interviews with eight teachers, observations at planning meetings and Seminars, and analysis of documents. Student data came from 34 participants. Most teachers were satisfied with the Seminars, although three felt that the ethnic pieces discussed were powerful but not relevant to the students at the school, which is 85% white. Teachers also thought that further training would be helpful. Student interviews indicated that the Seminars were effective in enhancing higher order thinking and conflict resolution. Students reacted best to topics that they found personally relevant. Overall findings suggest that the Socratic Seminars increased students' cognitive and social functioning. (SLD)

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Spotlight on Student Success

A digest of research from the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success

No. 110

Improving Critical Thinking through Socratic Seminars

by

Vernon C. Polite and Arlin Henry Adams

This research brief reports on the effects of Socratic Seminar methodology at Lookout Valley Middle School, a small (220 students: 85% white, 15% African American) middle school located in Chattanooga, Tennessee. An integral part of the emerging Paideia Schools Movement (Wheelock, 1994) among urban public schools of Chattanooga, Socratic Seminars are well-planned opportunities for middle-level students to engage in intelligent discussions in which ideals, values, social issues, and principles are critically scrutinized in nonthreatening environments.

Socratic Seminars are fashioned after the instruction-through-questioning methodology of Socrates; they focus on a wide range of topics, including specific readings, scientific demonstrations, and the arts. The chief goals of Seminar implementation include enhancing students' abilities to: think critically, resolve conflict, and clarify and articulate values.

The authors' goal was to examine the extent to which Seminars facilitated key areas of development associated with the "middle school concept." Indeed, Seminar methodology is based largely on basic pedagogical and organizational principles regarding the education of middle-level students.

The Middle School Concept

The middle school concept was perhaps best described by Sara Lake (1988)

as "a bridge between elementary and secondary schooling that helps children pass from childhood to adolescence" (p. 1). During this period, students are only beginning to move into the early phases of Piaget's formal operational stage of development; thus, their ability to think abstractly and utilize metacognition—vital skills for lifelong learning—is nascent. A basic tenet of the middle school concept, then, is to provide students with repeated opportunities to practice and develop higher order thinking skills.

Methods

The authors collected school/teacher-related data using a variety of means: in-depth interviews with eight of the nine middle school teachers; observations of interdisciplinary team meetings and Seminar sessions during the 1994-95 school year; and analysis of official documents.

Student data were collected from a random sample ($n = 34$) of Lookout Valley's students during one-on-one interviews between students and the authors, using a semistructured interview format.

Findings—Teachers' Perspectives

While most of the teachers reported satisfaction with Seminars planned at the school level, three complained that the Seminar pieces selected at the district level often had a puissant African-American cultural focus, reflective of the overall makeup of the district but not the

largely white Lookout Valley student population; they felt that the ethnic pieces often were powerful in content, but not relevant to the students.

Teacher interviews also revealed that teachers would benefit from training that provides specific answers to the question, "What is so different about this approach from what we have always done?" There was a need for an operational definition of the Socratic Seminar method at Lookout Valley, one that not merely defines the pedagogical concepts upon which it is founded, but explains the rationale supporting its use.

In sum, teachers were divided with regard to perceptions of the Seminars' utility. Many seemed concerned about issues of cognition and metacognition, and thus were very supportive of the Seminars' usefulness as tool for building higher order thinking skills; others questioned the "why" behind Seminars, often indicating that they perceived little difference between Seminar methodology and traditional teaching.

Findings—Students' Perspectives

Student interviews revealed that Seminar methodology was especially effective in enhancing at least two realms of student development: higher order thinking and conflict resolution.

Approximately 80% of the student sample engaged in at least intermittent metacognitive or Piagetian formal operational activity in Seminars, girls more so

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than boys. Indeed, though the present sample contained large numbers of sixth graders, the observed incidence of metacognition was roughly equivalent to what might be anticipated of a random sampling of eighth graders. Importantly, almost 40% of the students who showed at least intermittent metacognitive skills indicated attempting to use these skills throughout their life experiences.

Student findings also indicated that Seminars were strongly associated with students' development of conflict resolution skills. Eighty percent showed consistent knowledge of some conflict resolution skills, with two thirds of this group providing evidence of elaborate resolution strategies, including recognition of the need to cooperatively research areas of dissidence, and the concept of win-win outcomes (e.g., "agreeing to disagree").

The following comments, made by a seventh-grade girl recollecting a situation in which she found herself in the midst of a heated disagreement, are indicative of the students' accounts of using conflict resolution in Seminar sessions:

[I try] not to be really argumentative about it. [I] just express my feelings again, and say, "... if you've got different feelings about it, then that's your opinion."

Additionally, 100% of the students in the sample indicated that other people's opinions were of value at least some of the time; 80% expressed that other people's positions were of value even when the beliefs in question directly conflicted with their own.

Best Seminar Experiences

More than half of the sample students reported that the most important factor in rating Seminar materials was relevance to their own life experiences. Forty percent indicated that a particular Seminar was their favorite because it was "interesting"; while this term was used both vaguely and with great liberty, it appeared to connote both a topic of personal interest and one in which a majority of the class participated actively.

A majority of the students in both categories cited the Seminar entitled, "Fear is an Illusion," based on a book by basketball star Michael Jordan, as a Seminar favorite.

In this seminar, the students were guided through an excerpt in which Jordan reflects, largely metaphorically, on the construct of fear as an illusion. Although this was the most popular Seminar topic, only approximately 5% of the students queried indicated that their favorite Seminar topics were metaphorical, none using that specific term.

Worst Seminar Experiences

Roughly a third of the interviewed students indicated specific negative responses to metaphorical topics that were highly abstract, frequently describing them as incomprehensible or "weird." While they enjoyed metaphorical topics they could "relate to" (for example, the "Fear" Seminar described above) or with which they were familiar (for example, Seminars that drew from various fairy tales or popular comic books), they often "tuned out" of sessions that were deeply abstract.

Echoing the concerns of some of Lookout's teachers, a number of students stated that their least favorite topics were irrelevant to them—that is, they could find no relationship between the topic material and any element of their own lives. Common responses of this nature included comments such as "it doesn't really happen that way" and "nobody really does that."

General Perceptions of the Seminar Environment

One half of all students strongly preferred the Seminar environment to that of the regular classroom. Reasons given included students' perceptions that: they accomplished more in Seminar environments; their thoughts and feelings were taken seriously in Seminar; the Seminar topics were always more interesting; and they felt more inclined to "discuss more than when in regular classes." Several students also noted that in Seminar, teachers get "more involved with the students."

The minority that strongly preferred the traditional classroom categorically declared their dislike for the Seminar environment's lack of traditional classroom social structures and authority figures. These students consistently indicated that they only felt they were learning when the teacher was dispensing the information.

Conclusion: Recommendations for Effective Middle-Level Implementation

Though a number of problem areas were unearthed—mostly implementation and staff issues—overall, the array of findings suggests the potential of Socratic Seminars as a viable means of increasing the cognitive and social functioning of middle school students. The following recommendations are offered to local educational decision makers who are considering adopting Socratic Seminars in middle school settings:

- Encourage team members to plan Seminars that (a) are based on student exigencies and interests; and (b) compel students to utilize higher order and abstract thinking skills (keeping in mind the developmental/cognitive abilities of middle school students).

- Provide teacher workshops that: (a) clearly define metacognition; (b) underscore the importance of linking metacognitive development to the Seminars; and (c) delineate means by which this linkage can be established.

- Provide training opportunities through which teachers across grade levels can construct an operational definition of Socratic Seminars.

- Stress, during training sessions, the importance of understanding the distinction between traditional classroom teaching that incorporates focus groups and discussion sessions from the Seminar approach.

- Encourage each interdisciplinary team to assess its development as a team. Schumacher's (1992) five-phase model might be helpful in this endeavor.

- Insure that all teachers value and understand the exploratory needs of middle school students and are able to link those understandings to Seminar implementation.

References and Related Publications

This research brief draws heavily on Polite, V. C., & Adams, A. H. (in press). Improving critical thinking through Socratic Seminars. *Urban Education*, 32(2). (LSS Publication Series No. 96-3).

For more information on Socratic Seminars (including a full listing of the references cited in this research brief), or to obtain LSS Publication Series No. 96-3, contact the LSS Information Services Coordinator at 1-800-892-5550. For more information on LSS, visit the LSS homepage at <http://www.temple.edu/departments/LSS>.